

## Forest Plan Revision

# Access, recreation emerge as top issue in Libby GA

By PAUL BORING  
Western News Reporter

Access and recreation emerged as the most discussed topics in the Libby Geographic Area Forest Plan Revision Workgroup that finished meeting in April.

A variety of community residents have been attending the workgroup since June as part of the forest plan revision process for the Kootenai and Idaho Panhandle national forests.

As part of the community-based planning effort, several geographic areas within the forest met on a regular basis and worked toward developing desired condition statements for the revision process.

Included in the Libby workgroup were representatives from the local ATV, snowmobile and horseback riding clubs, industry and other groups.

Several of the working groups suggested more loop routes, clear signage for trails, and an evaluation of proposed road closures for future routes.

"It wasn't always about new construction of roads and trails" said Libby District Ranger Malcolm Edwards. "The group recommended that we promote existing loops, and in some cases work towards connecting trails."

In its desired condition statement, the workgroup adopted the term "adequate access" when describing the recreational climate on the Kootenai National Forest.

"Adequate access is provided for a range of recreation opportunities that provide for a quality of life, including scenery, firewood gathering, huckleberry picking, hiking, horseback riding, snowmobile use, recreational driving, hunting,

and ATV use," the desired condition statement read.

Edwards said the group agreed that with the mounting interest in recreation in the area, access should be augmented to allow wider user dispersal on the forest. Group members were also sensitive to the Forest Service's responsibility for maintaining wildlife habitat.

"The group really does not have a problem with us managing for the grizzly bears, but not to the point where it would exclude or severely restrict human use of the forest," he said. "The Forest Service recognizes that."

The workgroup agreed with a prior recommendation to establish the northeast corner of the Cabinet Mountains as an addition to wilderness areas. Until Congress acts on that, the group recom-

mends maintaining trails in such areas with chainsaws, a more cost-efficient and practical method.

"I think people around here feel an ownership in the Cabinet Mountain Wilderness," Edwards said. "A lot of the group members also want other areas to remain 'roadless in character,' but still actively managed, and they would like to see some of these areas prioritized to allow natural fire regimes when conditions permit."

Addressing fire risk, the group recommended more Wildland Urban Interface fuels reduction projects and an improved ability to treat fuels outside of the WUI area. Also suggested was the utilization of slash and waste material from fuel

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WESTERN NEWS

Libby MT 59923

Wednesday & Friday

APR 28 2004

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treatments.

"The group wants the Forest Service to leave bigger trees," Edwards said. "We often do that now."

The economic climate in Libby spurred the group to tackle the issue of timber production. In the desired condition state, members encouraged the use of the local workforce and emphasized smaller sales and stewardship projects conducted with input from local citizens.

As with the Bull and Yaak GA workgroups, the Libby participants felt aggressive noxious weed control is vital in the Kootenai National Forest. Information regarding weeds could be disseminated through an established website, the group said.

Public education was a recurring theme in many of the issues discussed by the group. Enhanced education for the public would open the communication lines and head off

potential conflicts.

The next step in the forest plan revision is for the planning team to examine the desired condition statements and determine how they can be integrated into the final plan.

"The planning team is in the process of drafting alternatives," Edwards said. "Developing the forest plan is like any National Environmental Policy Act document. It has alternatives. The planning team will take the desired condition statements and try to incorporate them in one or more alternatives."

For polarized issues like access, multiple alternatives may be formulated to incorporate the different suggestions.

Once the planning team develops a draft, workgroup members will reconvene later in the year and learn how their recommendations are assimilated in the plan.

Edwards was impressed with the

workgroup's cohesiveness and dedication to the process.

"I'm really appreciative of our group here," he said. "Some of them even took the initiative to meet on their own in smaller groups and they would come up with desired conditions that they would then share with the larger group."

Although some issues were irreconcilable within the group, Edwards said the members carried out their duties respectfully. He also wanted to acknowledge the work of Deb Bond, Forest Service facilitator for the group sessions. Bond was instrumental in keeping things on track.

"I think people appreciated the opportunity to speak their minds and discuss the issues," he said. "They developed an appreciation for different points of view. Not everything came to a consensus, but many of the issues were resolved within the group."